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Straws.



Paper

Read before The Ohio Commandery
of The Loyal Legion,

April 7, 1909,

by

Thomas Tinsley Heath,

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; General Brigadier General U. S. V.





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STRAWS.

*Commander and Companions of Ohio Commandery
of the Loyal Legion:*

When the Recorder assigned me for a paper for this meeting, I had so long enjoyed and been satisfied with our accustomed orators and writers, that it was a shock to be disturbed in my repose; but I shall be happy if by your forbearance and generous kindness I may throw out some straws by which you "can tell which way the wind blows," for there are straws of the mind and heart, and some of them like that wonderful jointed tube which nature builds—a very slender straw—yet bears wavily a rich head of golden grain; and if what I shall utter proves inferior, I shall not be unhappy, but rejoice in the knowledge that out of the barns of your memory, and the deeps of your true inwardness, you can select and save the good things intended to be indicated by my text.

Let us turn from the restful and rollicking gay, to a graver vein, if we may, for it is expected that what is said here will relate less or more to the Civil War and to The Grand Army of which you were part. No two soldiers of that army, and no two officers were gifted exactly alike—except in this—they presumably went forth at the call of duty; and it was easy for thousands of them to lay down their lives. They could do no more! Though all of us were to speak with the tongues of men and of angels, we could not tell the story. I would sooner try to bail out the ocean with a spoon than make the attempt. It will be fresh in interest for a thousand years, and the war, its origin, and the lessons it taught, cannot be fully known until the books are opened by the Recording Angel.

The lives we led in the army were strenuous, were instructive, and in reviewing our experiences, the Old Bonds grow stronger, and new lights illumine our lives, and must make them holier and better, (which is what we come together for) so that as following Companions

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who have gone before, we come "to the bounds of life where we lay our burdens down"—God grant we each leave a blessed trail of light, even after our bodies have set below the horizon of death.

Permit me to give you a page cut from my old scrap book, which will be an open door for me, and may open many a door of memory and contemplation for each Companion.

I quote a clipping from Harper's Weekly of late in 1862.

SOLDIERS' DEAD LETTERS.

"Why not write Dead Soldiers' Letters at once?" says a voice at my elbow.

Only out of respect to the old logical rule requiring the perfect definition of a class to embrace all the individuals composing it. It is a sad truth that too many of these missives that have been wandering about in the mail-bags are the letters, and the last letters—the last written expression of thought or wish—of men who have dared to die for their country. Many of these rough-looking, soiled and torn envelopes now lying in the Dead-letter Office, after a fruitless journey in search of friends to read their contents, are filled with strange tales of blood and battle, or breathe sentiments that should stir the very soul of patriotism, and fire the heart and nerve the arm of every man who perils his life in the cause of his country's honor. Outside, it is a shapeless and uninviting mass of worn and crumpled envelopes, soiled with the dust and smoke of every camp and battlefield on the continent; within, are the thoughts, wishes, last words and dying prayers of those who have offered their own lives to save the life of the nation.

"Up to the last of August, soldiers' letters, written from camps or head-quarters, and containing no valuable inclosure, when returned from the local post-offices to the Dead-letter Office because they were "not called for," have been destroyed, because they could not, like ordinary letters, be returned to the writers. Armies are always upon the move, and the ten or twelve weeks that must expire between the date of a soldier's letter in camp and its return to Washington as a "dead-letter" render any attempt to place it again in the hands of the writer as impossible as it is useless. The Department having once sent the letter to its place of destination, and advertised it there, has no legal authority to incur further trouble or expense in the matter.

Hence the practice that obtained in the opening-room of the Dead-letter Office, of throwing into the waste-basket all "dead-letters" containing no valuable inclosure, which had been written by soldiers from camps or headquarters. As the war progressed and great battles were fought, consecrating in history such names as Pea Ridge, Fort Donaldson, Shiloh, Fair Oaks and Malvern Hill, and marking the boundaries of each field of bloody strife with the tumuli of buried heroes, it came to be noticed that many of the soldier's letters, written upon the eve of or at the close of these fierce struggles for a nation's life, contained matter of the gravest interest to the friends and relatives at home. Some of these lost missives, containing the words of father, brother, son, or husband, who had gone down in the storm of battle, or survived to tell the fate of other martyrs in the holy cause, and which had failed in the first effort to place them in the hands of the person addressed, were rightly conceived to be of as much importance to the soldier's friends as the letter inclosing a part of his pay to the wife and little ones at home.

"The subject having attracted the attention of Mr. Zevely, the Third Assistant Postmaster-General, who has charge of the Dead-letter Office, and whose hand is as open as his heart is warm in the cause of aiding the soldier in the field and his family at home, he at once determined to have this class of letters examined by a competent clerk, and all that were likely to be of interest or importance again forwarded to the post-offices originally addressed. As the law authorized no additional expense for such an enterprise, one of the clerks volunteered to perform the work out of office hours; and so a second effort is being made to get these soldiers' letters into the hands of their friends.

"An interview with the clerk who spends his evenings and mornings in this work brought me to a knowledge of the enterprise, and I write this sketch with the purpose of bringing the matter to public notice, and thus to aid in getting these lost letters into the hands of those for whom they were intended.

"I learn from the gentleman who has charge of the work that four or five hundred letters a day of this class come into the Dead-letter Office. As they are opened, all soldiers' letters containing no valuable inclosure are placed in his hands, and after office-hours he proceeds to examine them, and select such as can again be sent to the local post-

offices with some prospect of reaching the parties addressed. Each letter thus re-sent is entered upon a blank form addressed to the post-master, and charging him to use "all diligence to secure its delivery." This form contains not only the name of the person addressed on the envelope, but the name of the writer and of the place where the letter was dated. This schedule, or catalogue of letters, is to be conspicuously posted for one month, and any letters upon it that are not delivered in that time are to be returned to the Dead-letter Office at Washington, to be destroyed. The whole thing is a work of grace on the part of the Post-master General, there being no charge made for the second transportation of the letters or their delivery at the local post-offices. This being the case, it is proper to add, for the benefit of the Department, and to save people from unnecessary trouble, that it is quite useless to address inquiries to any one in the General Post-office respecting letters of this description. No record is kept of them, and those not re-sent are immediately destroyed. Any one looking for such a letter, known to have been advertised at a local post-office and returned as "dead" to Washington, should watch the posted catalogue of "Soldiers' Letters," which, for the smaller offices, is forwarded at the close of each month, and once a week or fortnight to the large city offices.

"With a proper care not to violate the confidence and privacy peculiarly strict in this office, I have been allowed to notice the character of some of these letters. Here is one written by T. T. H., Lieutenant Colonel Fifth Ohio Cavalry, and very fully and carefully directed, yet it has failed to reach its destination; and lest a second effort should prove as futile as the first, I am permitted to make an extract, in the hope that it may reach the eyes of the bereaved parents. The letter is written from Zanesville, Ohio, under date of May 27th, and addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Elliott, Baleyville, near Minneapolis, Minnesota, and reads thus:

'Friends:—On the evening of Monday, April 7, 1862, about five o'clock, after my regiment had been halted in its pursuit of the fleeing hordes of rebels, I rode slowly around the field, meditating on that bloody action, (Shiloh) and observing the effect of the 'bolts of war' on the dead bodies which covered the ground. Various were the attitudes and expressions of the fallen heroes; yet as I rode along, one smooth-faced lad, whose features were lit up by a smile, so attracted

and riveted my attention as to cause me to dismount and examine him. His uniform was neat as an old soldier's—his buttons polished, his person clean, his hair well combed, lying squarely on his back, his face toward the enemy, his wounds in front from which the last life-drops were slowly ebbing, his hands crossed on his breast, and a peaceful, heavenly smile resting on his marble features. I almost envied his fate as I thought—

'How sleep the brave who sink to rest,
By all their country's wishes blest!

By fairy hand their knell is rung,
By forms unseen their dirge is sung;
Lo! Honor comes, a pilgrim gray,
To bless the turf that wraps their clay,
And Freedom shall awhile repair
To dwell a weeping hermit there!'

I asked the by-standers who that lad was. No one could tell. Hoping to find some mark on his clothing by which I could distinguish him, I unbuttoned his roundabout, and in the breast pocket found a *Bible*, on the fly-leaf of which was an inscription by his mother to 'John Elliott.' In the same pocket was a letter from his mother, and one he had written to his uncle, both dabbled with blood. Pleased with getting these data from which to trace his family, I determined to preserve the *Bible* and letters and send them to you. I have since regretted that I did not examine all his pockets and save whatever may have been in them; but my time was short, and I felt that the *Bible* he had so faithfully carried would be treasure enough for you, and in the hurry of the moment I did not think to look for anything else. His remains received decent sepulture that night, and he now sleeps in a soldier's grave.

And now, my dear friends, I would have written to you weeks ago, but was long sick in camp, was sent to Ohio low with fever, and am but just able to begin to sit up.

You have doubtless wept over your dead boy. No human sympathy could assuage your grief. Yet He who guides and governs the universe of man and matter, I doubt not, has thrown around you 'everlasting arms,' and supported your faint, bereft, and bleeding hearts.

After awhile, when time shall have healed the wounds that war has inflicted, it will be a heritage of glory for you to reflect that your boy died in the cause of human rights and to save the life of a great nation; and you can with righteous pride boast that he fell in the thickest of the fight, with dead rebels all around him, his face to the foe, and in the 'very forefront of the battle?'

He died a young hero and martyr in the holy cause of freedom, and Elijah riding up the heavens in a chariot of fire had not a prouder entrance to the Celestial City than your boy. Let your hearts rejoice that there is one more waiting to welcome you to the "shining shore."

"Here is a brief extract from the letter of a surgeon on the Peninsula to a friend at home:

'Almost the first one I came to was our poor little friend Dick, the bright-eyed but pale-faced drummer boy, who broke from the warm embrace of his mother and rushed into the wild storm of war at the first call to arms. He was still alive, and able to speak in a low voice. I raised his head and gave him some water. He smiled his thanks, and said, "Doctor, tell mother I wasn't afraid to die. Tell brother Jimmy he can have my pony; and Sis can have all my books; and they musn't cry about me, for I think I have done right. And take the drum to them; and bury this little flag with me—and that's all!"' And that was all; and a moment afterward the spirit of the young hero went up to heaven.'

"Here is a letter from a wife to her husband in the Peninsular army. It arrived too late, and is on its way back to the writer, with the simple indorsement on the envelope, by an officer of his regiment: "Was killed yesterday in the battle of Malvern Hill."

"These are a few examples of what may be found in the "Soldiers' Dead-letters," and if local postmasters will manifest the same disposition exhibited in the action of the Department at Washington, thousands of those lost epistles will find their way to the rightful owners, and serve to comfort and console many a bereaved and breaking heart."

The letter, thiere published was picked up as waste paper in an out-house in a Michigan lumbering town; the eye of a lumber merchant, by chance, lighting on it; his attention being riveted, he read it through to find that he was "The Uncle John" of the dead soldier boy, and his darling sister was the "Mrs. Elliott" who had given her son the Bible inscribed to "John Elliott, from his mother," and the good woman, with it, had given her *beloved* to save The Union. The uncle preserved the paper he had thus found, immediately en-

closed it in a letter to his sister in Southern Illinois, her home, erroneously supposed to have been in Minnesota.

The mother at once wrote a letter addressed to the author of the letter thus found in Harper's Weekly, and it "followed the regiment" for nearly a year before it reached the author. It was answered, and later he had the happiness, through the Express Company, of placing the relic book and the relic letter in the widow's hand—and maintained a correspondence with the noble woman for 15 years, and until she joined her soldier boy who went to heaven from Shiloh.

After Shiloh, and while thousands of dead were not yet buried, a "Bully Butcher Boy," as he called himself,—who had enlisted in my regiment, was a hard drinker, continually breaking out of camp of instruction, and returning with a load of whiskey from the distillery at Milford; himself crazed with it, and by distributing among comrades, soon had the camp in an uproar. In spite of orders, this was repeated so often that, to correct the evil, the severest discipline had to be resorted to.

.The angry and defiant "Pat" was initiated into the mysteries of "Buck and gag"—while with much drunken rage and profanity he swore he "would empty your (my) saddle the first time we get into the smoke!"

I had forgotten the occurrence; our first great baptism in battle was Shiloh, where there was both fire and smoke enough. On Tuesday evening after that battle, "Pat" saluted me, asked if he could have a few words, and on being told to speak on, he said, "Little Colonel, you remember when you bucked and gagged me in the guard house at Camp Dennison, and I threatened to empty your saddle in the first battle?" "Yes, I remember it." "Well, I intended to do it; I was mad at your strict discipline. I came now to tell you that on Sunday and Monday I saw that without obedience to orders, we would have been killed or captured. I saw that you were right, and I was all wrong; and I came to ask your pardon for my language and violation of orders, and to pledge my life that you will never have any more trouble with me. I will obey every order, be a good soldier, and give neither you nor my company officers any cause of complaint. Try me." I could but reply, "I will."—Now wasn't that enough for a Volunteer Officer to think about? I thought of *it*, and many other things, and "Pat" thought something that made him a splendid cav-

alry man, and he remained one of the men an officer knows he can rely on!—A comfortable feeling no *Companion* who experienced it will lose the memory of.

That Union Army—think of it! All kinds of men drawn from the body of the land, the high and low; the rich and poor; the learned and ignorant; coming from the clearing, the farm, the shop, the mine, the lakes, the rivers:—A few of the “Yale men;” a few of “The Harvard Clan;” and the *million* from the homes, the stores, offices and schools—all taught, less or more, in the world university, the lessons Franklin, Washington, Jefferson and the Fathers gave. All had heard the echo of the shot the embattled farmers fired at Concord Bridge, and their hearts had felt the pang when Warren fell; for their noble mothers and fathers had taught them to believe in the Declaration of Independence, and to rejoice in the Rising Sun and their Country’s Flag, the two grandest sights in their earth or heavens! And as they gazed upon these symbols, the viewless spirits of the air of Freedom ministered unto them and explained what The Flag stood for—what the fundamentals of free government are—Liberty regulated by Law; Law that dealt Justice to all—for there is no Law not founded on Justice. If *Injustice* were to prevail, the heavens and the earth have already passed away! Conceiving this truth, was it any wonder that all the people felt the uplift of humanity, that the Truth made them free, and that the best and bravest made up The Union Army? Whose men experienced that swelling of the heart which, as nearly as it can be translated is, “It is sweet and glorious to die for one’s country.”—These are they who inhabit our National Cemeteries and unmarked graves on sea and land, and who will live forever in our love and in the memory and hearts of free men all round the world.

If asked for the explanation in detail of the Love of Freedom—of our Native Land, and our Best Government beneath the Sun—neither tongue nor pen can express it—all mental science and philosophy fail—all human wisdom is at fault—but somehow we know that when Nancy Hanks conceived and brought forth a backwoods son, and that poor boy became the Commander-in-Chief of our Armies and Navy—the Great Emancipator of a race enslaved—*Abraham Lincoln*, (a greater than Moses,) in his pure, simple, honest, earnest, wise life of devotion

to human Freedom, illustated what is meant by, "God manifest in the flesh!"

It does not suit my purpose at this time, to shine in the reflected glory which gilds the subordinate, from the accidents of service under the most noble of our chiefs; nor speak of councils attended or heard, and least of all to tell of the very humble part your speaker was permitted to take in the greatest Civil War of all history. The few moments allotted me are only enough to point to a few stars which burn and shine, illustrating the high points of *Truth*, and the strong points in the lives and characters of our great Companions, in the army which taught us and the world great lessons.

When the ignorance, passion and prejudice of men produce such conflict of opinion that the final appeal to the arbitrament of the sword is made, and the decision is rendered, as it was in our case, it is heavenly music to hear our Companion Ulysses S. Grant say "Let us have peace!" and grand to see the great Confederate Robert E. Lee turn his brilliant sword into an intellectual and moral pruning hook in Freedom's vineyard,—and hear all our people say Amen! When, later, bad men, cunning and designing grafters, sought to pervert right ways, our Companion as President, made the bugle give no uncertain sound in, "Let no guilty man escape!"

After he had filled Washington's chair and was making his triumphal peace march around the world, and in Germany attended a Fourth of July Banquet in his honor, an over-fervid orator too fulsomely calling him the greatest Captain of any age, asserted that but for him our armies would have been defeated and the Cause of the Union lost,—he arose and with great solemnity said, "I cannot agree with the last speaker. Had I fallen in that conflict, there were ten thousand other men in the Union Army, any one of whom could have led to victory and saved the Union!" To my mind, the best and truest of his utterances,—he was in it, True to himself, to God, his Country, and was not false to any man.

Reporting to William Tecumseh Sherman at Paducah, Ky., my heart and sword modestly followed that brilliant commander, our Companion in the Ohio Commandery, until my brigade had the honor to escort him and our flag to Durhams Station, North Carolina, where Gen. Joseph E. Johnston surrendered his Confederate Army.

Sherman said "War is Hell"—and he knew! Sometimes terrible,

he yet was gentle as he was brave and patriotic,—and the last time he spoke in this city—with the far look in his eyes, and the loving tremulo in his voice, looking at the young men present, he besought them to cultivate the Truth—build up manly moral character, and uphold our Free Government and our Country's Flag with all that it stands for! It may illustrate the truths—the eternal right, which Sherman taught, which we all fought for, and which we hoped would throttle the infernal greed and graft-seeking of “undesirable citizens,” who put the lust of *money* above the love of mankind, if I refer to a Confederate Staff Officer whom I first met after the war, whom I learned to admire and love, and was proud to call my friend. I refer to the late *Col. David French Boyd*, who was teacher of Languages in the Louisiana Military Academy at Alexandria, while our Sherman was its Superintendent. You all remember how, against every entreaty to remain with them and support Secession, he decided to support the Nation's Flag under which he was born and educated, and to which he owed allegiance.

Col. Boyd, with every other member of the Faculty and almost the whole Corps of Cadets, entered the Confederate Army. At the close of the war, was Chief-Engineer Officer on the Staff of Gen. Dick Taylor, commanding the Trans. Mississippi District—his fortune gone, penniless, ragged, sick, he found himself a prisoner of war. Sherman found him thus, visited him in prison and ministered to his wants, fed and clothed him, divided his pocketbook with him, and after he took the oath saw that he was set free and given employment suited to his great talents.

The bond that bound David and Jonathan bound Sherman and Boyd. The Confederate Staff Officer, though an Alumnus of the University of Virginia, an experienced College Professor and great Engineer, had in the fires of war learned lessons never before assigned to him; by his back sights he corrected the errors in his work and projected his lines aright under *the Flag*. When Sherman fell, the old-time Confederate made the funeral march from Washington to St. Louis, and in the raw storm, Boyd, lingering alone, was the last mourner to shed a tear over the grave of Sherman.

Girding his loins, after he had been born again, he undertook the work of reconstruction, covering the scars and building up the wastes that war had made, by establishing a system of public schools in the

south, and so carried it forward that when he fell, it was as President of "The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College," at the Capital, Baton Rouge;—built by him, with the mighty aid and influence of Sherman, and the gifts of our United States Government, until it stands to-day a grand Educational Institution, training young Americans for leadership, and those already taught by him, the *Alumni*, lately returned and gratefully erected a Memorial Hall in his honor, on the University grounds at Baton Rouge; finer far than has been erected to any other soldier or statesman in Louisiana.

If we think great thoughts, we shall do great deeds. As a man thinketh so is he.

In the onrush of these times, it behooves every Companion of The Loyal Legion to think the best thoughts only, that they may discharge every Duty—for "*Duty*" is the grandest word in the English language, and by the unselfish and patriotic discharge of it, justify the existence of the Loyal Legion and make its insignia on our breasts a burning glory.

I have found the thoughts so vast, and the memories so swelling, and coming a countless throng and on the charge—that neither tongue nor pen can keep the pace—yet the Old Bonds will make you wondrous kind, and you will credit my unsatisfactory performance with the right intent, and yourselves make the effort *good!*

I did not always feel as I do now. I could not. Many of you may feel as I do. I hope you can and will. Looking at the whole case, it seems to me that the late Rebellion and Secession was but another Prodigal Son experience, magnified by ten thousand times ten thousand diameters, and I am glad that Uncle Sam is big enough in heart to run down the road to welcome the "Boys" who returned, and we will not object if he holds them with a golden chain about their necks and hearts, while we make the Old Home ring with rejoicing that "The Lost Cause" is forever dead,—and these, his sons, who were lost are found: were dead, but are alive again;—and after all, are our Brothers.

Listen to the strain that comes floating down from 1861.—"I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though we may have strained, we must not break our bonds of affection.

The mystic chord of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriotic grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as they surely will be by the better angels of our nature."

Look! at the transfiguration smile lighting the sad face of the Immortal and now Sainted Lincoln, as from his high seat he notes that "the better angels" he invoked *have gotten in their work* and the "*Boys*"—from South and North—the Blue and the Gray,—now reinforced by the Black Corps, recruited from that nation which was born in a day—all, all, are "Marching under The Flag, and keeping step to the music of The Union."

